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# THE GRACE OF GOD

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## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN JEWISH & CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

BY THE

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# THE GRACE OF GOD

## CHAPTER I

### THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH, in his "Notes on the Parables" (p. 384), calls the parable of the Prodigal Son "the pearl and crown of all the Scriptures." It has often been called the "Gospel within the Gospel." But it offers a remarkable contrast to all the other parables of the Gospels by teaching the glad tidings that God forgives His rebellious child without the intercession of a Saviour. This parable knows nothing of the Cross, of Vicarious Atonement, or of Salvation through faith in Jesus. This leads to the question, Is this parable part of that Jewish teaching that has been so largely used by the New Testament writers? An attempt will be made to show that this parable is Jewish in origin. Fortunately, it

has been preserved by Luke in its Jewish frame, without the slightest addition of specific Christian or Pauline doctrine. Like the Sermon on the Mount and the so-called Lord's Prayer, the parable of the Prodigal Son is Jewish from beginning to end. If there were no parallels in Jewish literature to this parable, it would not be difficult to recognize in the actual wording of the parable traces of Old Testament ideas and expressions. Moreover, there are several Jewish parallels to the parable. Some scholars believe that a parallel may be found in Buddhist literature. The reference is to the "White Lotus of the Good Law" in the "Saddharmapundarika-Sutra" (see Edmunds and Anesaki, "Buddhist and Christian Gospels," vol. ii., p. 260 ; and Seydel, "Das Evangelium von Jesu in seinen Verhältnissen zur Buddha-sage"; also see Jülicher, "Gleichnisreden Jesu," vol. i., p. 172). Again, there is a similar story, from an Egyptian source, in Deissmann's "Licht vom Osten."\*

Our present concern is with Jewish parallels

\* Æsop's fable, "The Prodigal Son," is said to have been based on Luke's parable (Jülicher, vol. ii., p. 362).



only, and therefore it is unnecessary to discuss the Buddhist or Egyptian versions. We shall begin by considering Luke's parable, pointing out O.T. references; then we shall deal with the story as part of Jewish literature.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN LUKE

xv. 11-24.

11. A certain man had two sons:

12. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of the substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

13. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there he wasted his substance with riotous living (with harlots).

14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want.

15. And he went and joined himself to one of the

SIMILAR IDEAS AND EXPRESSIONS IN O. T.

Compare Abraham's division of his substance amongst his children (Gen. xxv. 6).

Note the contrast between the wise son and the foolish son in Prov. xxix. 3—viz., "Whoso loveth wisdom rejoiceth his father: but he that keepeth company with harlots wasteth his substance."

Famine as a Divine judgment, followed by migration, occurs in Gen. xli. 56, ff.

The rare word in N.T. Greek for *citizen* is to be

citizens of that country ; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat : and no man gave unto him.

17. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger.

18. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight.

19. I am no more worthy to be called thy son : make me as one of thy hired servants.

20. And he arose and came to his father. But

found in LXX (Prov. xi. 9 ; see note below).

“The drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty” (Prov. xxiii. 21 ; see also Ezek. xxxiv. 29). “Men of this world whose portion is in this life, and whose *belly* thou fillest” (Ps. xvii. 14 ; see also Prov. xviii. 20).

The unusual N.T. term for hired servants occurs in LXX (Lev. xxv. 50 ; Job vii. 1).

“And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee . . . and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and thou shalt return unto the Lord thy God” (Deut. xxx. 1, 2).

Hos. i. 9.

For similar wording see the story of Jacob meeting

while he was afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him.

21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son.

22. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23. And bring forth the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and make merry:

24. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.

Joseph in Gen. xlvi. 29; see also Gen. l. 1.

For similar expressions see Josh. vii. 20; and also 1 Sam. xx. 1.\*

See Esth. vi. 10 for robe; Esth. iii. 10 and viii. 2 for ring. See also Gen. xli. 42, and Ezek. xxiv. 17.

"The fatted calf" occurs in 1 Sam. xxviii. 24 (see LXX; Judg. vi. 25; also Jer. xlvi. 21). "Eat and make merry" occurs in Eccles. viii. 15.

Gen. xlvi. 30. "The dead shall live" see Isa. xxvi. 19. "Lost and found" see 1 Sam. ix. 20.

Several words in the Greek text of the parable are remarkable, inasmuch as they are either peculiar to Luke or only occur in this

\* "To sin against heaven and against man" occurs in the Talmud (Syn., 27a).

context. Thus in ver. 13 ἀσώτως (riotously) is not found again either in the N.T. or in LXX. It occurs in Philo (De Prov. Mang., ii., p. 364), and was, we venture to suggest, borrowed by Luke from this Jewish writer. *The passage in Philo where this word is used is also the source for Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son.* Philo wrote somewhere about 30 c.E., whereas Luke wrote about 100 c.E. This shows that Philo's story of the love of the Father to His prodigal sons is at least half a century older than the Gospel parable. Stress is laid on this point, because whenever Jewish parallels to the Gospels are quoted, we are always reminded that the Gospels are so much earlier.\* In this case we have an important exception. It has escaped the notice of such scholars as Fiebig, Erich Bischoff, Weinel, and Jülicher. The latter writer maintains ("Die Gleichnisreden," vol. i., pp. 164-168) that the Jewish parallels supply but little of value for the explanation of the parables of the Gospels. Jülicher (vol. ii., pp. 172 and 314) speaks of "Tanchuma" as the Talmud.

\* See Montefiore, "Synoptic Gospels," pp. ciii-cv, and "Jowett Lectures," p. 85, for a similar standpoint.

This ignorance of Jewish literature settles the question as to his ability to criticize the writings of the Rabbis. Fiebig insists that the result of comparison shows more clearly than ever the uniqueness and absoluteness of Jesus's creations. This standpoint can easily be refuted if we allow plain common-sense to be the foundation of our criticism. We have seen that the origin of the parable of the Prodigal Son is clearly betrayed by the word *ᾰσώτως* (ver. 13). It takes us back to Philo, who first used it in the meaning of a "prodigal" son. We cannot now enter into the question of how much the New Testament owes to Philo. Siegfried's great work on Philo deals with this problem. Luke was no Hebrew scholar, and gladly borrowed from Philo and Josephus, as Max Krenkel has proved in his valuable book, "Josephus und Lucas."\* Another word peculiar to Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son is *πολίτης* (citizen) (xv. 15; xix. 14; Acts xxi. 39). It is not used by any other writer in the N.T. It has undoubtedly been borrowed by Luke from Philo (see last para-

\* See Enc. Bib., col. 5055, for further proof of Luke's indebtedness to Jewish writers.

graph of “*De Vita Contemplativa*”), or from LXX (Prov. xi. 9 and 12). The word *οὐσία* (substance) in ver. 12 is peculiar to Luke, but also occurs in Philo (see Jülicher, vol. ii., p. 337). Another rare word is *μισθιος* (hired servant), in verses 17 and 19. It occurs several times in LXX (Lev. xxv. 50 ; Job vii. 1 ; Mal. iii. 5 ; see also Tob. v. 12, 15, and Sir. xxxi. 27).

The word for ring, *δακτύλιος* (ver. 22), is not found again in the N.T. It is used by Philo (“*De Migratione Abr.*,” i., p. 451 ; Wendland, ii., p. 287, § 97) and by LXX (Gen. xli. 42). Most of these words are also used by Josephus ; references are given by Jülicher. Surely these peculiarities in Luke’s vocabulary point to his sources. They prove that the narrative is not original—at least, as far as phraseology is concerned. But stay. It might be granted that Luke made use of specific words which he found in Josephus, or in Philo, or in LXX, but that is a minor consideration. The real issue is, Did Luke find in these sources the story of the father who lovingly forgives his prodigal son ? We unhesitatingly reply (1) that Luke found the spirit of the story in the Old Testament, and (2) that he knew

Philo's "De Providentia," which practically gives the same story and lesson as the parable of the Prodigal Son. The whole story of Israel, the Prodigal Son of God, is a wonderful revelation of the love and grace of God, who is the loving Father. He *cannot* cast off His children, even when they are rebellious. The Old Testament again and again speaks of the rebellious sons. They are still sons of God, even though they be sinful (Deut. xxxii. 20; Isa. i. 2. Cf. Siphre Haazenu, § 308, and Talmud, Kiddushin, 36a).

The love of God is so great that He invites His prodigal sons to return to Him (Jer. iii. 14, 22; Hos. xiv. 1). God even goes to meet His sinful children (Mal. iii. 7; Zech. i. 3). The all-loving Father will not even remember the sins of His children (Jer. xxxi. 34). In Luke's parable we find only a part of this sublime teaching. There is nothing *new* in this excellent parable which Jews cannot find in the O.T. teaching. The Talmud (Bera-chot, 34b) points out that the message of all the prophets was to encourage repentance. It may be interesting to call attention to the fact that most of the prophetic passages just

quoted have been used, almost word for word, by the writers of the N.T. The lesson of the prodigal son is persistently taught by Jeremiah and Hosea, and has been retold by Philo, Luke, and the Rabbis.\* It is only to be regretted that the Church has not absorbed the simple and beautiful lesson of this Hebrew parable. It tells us in simple words that the sinful child needs no Mediator in order to approach his Father in heaven. It seems that the Church rejected, as though by instinct, the teaching of this parable, just because it was so Jewish. The Church, on set purpose, threw off all specific Jewish rites, ceremonies, and doctrines. It rejected the Jewish Sabbath, circumcision, as well as the Jewish principle of monotheism and Divine mercy and grace. This parable did not appeal in the least to Luther, the founder of Protestantism. Jülicher (vol.ii., p.334) refers to this curious fact—that the great German reformer entirely ignored this parable in his com-

\* Montefiore in "The Synoptic Gospels," p. 702, is incorrect in saying that the parable in Matthew xx. 1-16 supplies a corrective to Rabbinic teaching by emphasizing the principle of grace.



mentaries and expositions on the N.T. Instead of adopting the Jewish teaching of the parable that the Heavenly Father ever receives His sin-laden children in love and mercy, the Church has separated God's children from their Father, and teaches, in the spirit of Paul, that men can only approach God—(1) after His anger has been appeased by the sacrifice and death of a Saviour, and (2) through faith in this Saviour. Verily the Cross and the Gospel of Vicarious Atonement are stumbling-blocks, hiding the Father of all. The Jew can readily sympathize with the Unitarian standpoint adopted by scholars like Johannes Weiss, who declares that in this parable we have a miniature Gospel, just because it lacks the specific Christian doctrine of the Cross ("Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments," p. 447).

It seems that Pfleiderer is justified in considering Luke xv. 25-32 as an addition by Luke. The parable closed with the feast of welcome given to the returned prodigal. The parable shows how the sinner comes to his senses. His repentance is really remorse for the consequences of his folly. He feels sorry for the punishment and degradation

inflicted upon him. He does not experience any genuine contrition for his offences. He is not ashamed of his inner state; he only feels ashamed of his poverty. The pinch of hunger is the sting that touches his pride. Nevertheless, he is forgiven because the Father's mercy is infinite. Luke alone gives this parable, which Holtzmann thinks is a duplicate of the parable in Matt. xxi. 28-32. Jülicher disagrees, and prefers to find a parallel in Matt. xx. 1-16 (vol. ii., p. 362).

Luke's parable is part of the single tradition, and the question arises, Why was this parable passed over by the other Evangelists? If we were to assume that the parable is part of the genuine teaching of Jesus, we can only suggest a probable reason why Matthew omitted it. This reason would be because it was so utterly unlike the spirit of the other parables attributed to Jesus. Mark did not include it in his narrative because, in all probability, he did not know it. He gives only a very few parables compared with Luke. The other parables of Luke and Matthew had not in Mark's time grown up from single sayings into fully developed parables. Another possible reason why

Matthew ignored this parable may be due to the fact that he lays more stress on the exclusion from the Kingdom of God of those who might have been expected to be fit (*i.e.*, the Jewish nation); whereas Luke, writing for the larger world of Gentiles, lays more emphasis on the inclusion of all those who might have been expected to be unfit (sinners, harlots, and publicans). Matthew had no tradition that Jesus had ever taught that the Gentiles or sinners, harlots, and publicans would be received by their Father with more honour and deeper joy than their Pharisaic brethren who kept the Law (see “*Encyclopædia Biblica*,” cols. 1842, 1843).

Some of the great German critics, such as B. Weiss and Holtzmann, see in the parable of the Prodigal Son the apology for the conduct of Jesus for being found in the company of tax-collectors and sinners. This seems justified by the opening verses of Luke xv. : “And all the tax-collectors and sinners came near to him to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receives sinners, and eats with them.” The parable

clearly illustrates the profound interest which God takes in the sinner who returns to his Father—*i.e.*, the *repentant* sinner. Montefiore, in his recent commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (pp. 86, 985), finds “one of the specific characteristics of Jesus and one of the new excellences of the Gospel” summed up in Luke xv. 1: “The sinners drew near to hear him.” Let us ask, Who are the “sinners”? The Greek word for sinner (ἁμαρτωλός) is found in all the Synoptics (Mark ii. 17; Luke v. 32; and Matt. ix. 13). In these passages we find the word opposed to δίκαιος, the righteous. What did these terms, the “righteous” and the “sinners,” mean in the first century? There are various answers to this question. Preuschen, in his “Handwörterbuch zum Griechischen Neuen Testament,” p. 65, points out that when the word “sinner” is coupled with “tax-collector,” it means heathen. Even when standing by itself, “sinner” may also mean heathen, as in Luke vi. 32: “And if ye love them that love you, what thank have ye? for even heathens [not ‘sinners,’ as in R.V.] love those that love them.” In the parallel passage in Matt. v. 46 “heathen” is replaced by “tax-

collector.”\* Again, sinner, contrasted with the righteous, means one who is a transgressor of the Law. It is noteworthy that Matthew, who writes from the Jewish standpoint for Jews, frequently uses *ἀνομία*, lawlessness, while Luke (xiii. 27) has “iniquity” or “injustice” (*ἀδικία*), which represents the Gentile point of view. Undoubtedly the Jew termed all, who flagrantly disobeyed the Law, sinners. The loyal observers were the righteous.

The next question is, Is Montefiore right in saying that Jesus “*did not avoid sinners, but sought them out*” (p. 86)? Montefiore adds: “For him sinners were the subject, not of condemnation and disdain, but of pity. They were still children of God. This was a new and sublime contribution to the development of religion and morality.” Is all this historically correct? Do the Synoptic Gospels give a single instance to support Montefiore’s view? In the whole of the N.T. we have no evidence showing that Jesus *sought out* sinners. It is beside the question to say that sinners were in

\* Paul also seems to identify “sinner” with “heathen.” “We who are by nature (birth) Jews, and not sinners of the Gentiles” (Gal. ii. 15).

his company. The fact that Jesus sat at table in Levi's house (Mark ii. 13-17), and that "many tax-collectors and sinners sat also with Jesus," does *not* prove that he sought them out. The same criticism applies to the story in Luke vii. 36-50. The harlot was not *sought* out by Jesus, but was a visitor in the Pharisee's house. We are not told that the Pharisee raised the least objection to her presence. His house was open to the poor, the hungry, and the sinners. It is quite incorrect, from the historical standpoint, to speak of active sympathy with the sinners as a characteristic of Jesus. This is certainly not the opinion of Mark or Matthew. Pfeiderer ("Urchristentum," vol. i., pp. 543, 544) rightly notices that Luke, having special sympathy for the poor, gave special prominence to those features in Jesus's character and teaching which were, for this reason, peculiarly sympathetic to him. This explains the special stress laid by Luke on Jesus's sympathy with the sinners, as Luke prefers to designate the Gentiles. The Gentiles were sinners because they did not observe the Law. Luke is the missionary to convert these Gentiles, and repeatedly tells them that Jesus

consorted with sinners such as they were. These sinners, or lawless people, are the new chosen ones. This is one of the Pauline aspects in Luke that differentiates the third Gospel from the other Synoptic Gospels.

We have referred generally to the Synoptic Gospels, but additional support for our view is given by the fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John lies outside that large province, peculiar to Luke, which deals with the welcome of repentant sinners; and some of the words most in use with Luke — “repentance,” “publican,” and, in the words of Jesus, “sinner”—are altogether absent from John. It seems that this marked sympathy for sinners is really the creation of Luke.\* If it had been a feature in Jesus’s teaching, why do we hear so much of the woes, the *eternal* punishment, the gnashing of teeth, and bitter wailing? According to Mark iii. 29, Jesus taught that disbelief in himself was a sin for which there was no forgiveness. Where, then, is the sympathy for *all* sinners? Did not Jesus say,

\* Pfeiderer, “Urchristentum,” vol. i., p. 544, notes the fact that Luke’s friendly attitude towards the Gentiles is accentuated by his marked hostility against the Jews.

“Few enter the gate”? Did he not predict the damnation of the hostile Pharisees with complacency and satisfaction?

The rule “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine” (Matt. vii. 6), is the answer of Matthew to the question, Did Jesus show sympathy for the sinners (*i.e.*, Gentiles)? The four Gospels go so far as to assert that Jesus taught in parables in order that the sinners who came to him for sympathy should not understand, and were to remain in ignorance and sin (Matt. xiii. 13; Mark iv. 12; Luke viii. 10; John xii. 40). If, then, as we believe, there is no historical proof that Jesus felt profound sympathy for sinners, is it not a fact that Luke was the first to sound this new note in the history of religion? Our review of the facts of history compels us to answer this question in the negative. As we shall see, Philo is full of genuine sympathy for the sinners, even going so far as to hold out a larger share of Divine pity for the unfortunate ones who, by reason of their sin, had lost all hope of God’s pardon.

There is no occasion to offer any further criticism on the parable as a whole or in detail.



The excellent commentaries of Plummer, Weiss, Holtzmann, and Jülicher, deal exhaustively with the text. They are all agreed that the parable teaches the universal grace of God. This valuable doctrine, we shall see, is also insisted on by Philo. Windisch, in his delightful book, "Die Frömmigkeit Philos," p. 69, refers to this important aspect of Philo's theology. He does not, however, enter into any discussion as to a parallel between Luke and Philo. There can be no doubt that Luke used Philo (see "Encyclopædia Biblica," col. 1790). Siegfried sees the influence of Philo in Luke xiii. 28 and 29, also in chapters xvi. 9; xvii. 33; xix. 13, *ff.*; and xxiv. 51. The debt that Christianity owes to Philo will one day be recognized. Conybeare, in his "Myth, Magic, and Morals," pp. 353, 355, deals with this question, and shows that the ideas, as well as the names, of the Trinity, the Logos, Ransom, have all been derived from Philo.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PRODIGAL SON IN JEWISH LITERATURE

THE earliest form of the *parable* is to be found in Philo. In a fragment of Philo's work "On Providence" (Mang., vol. ii., p. 634), we read: "God is not a tyrant\* who practises cruelty and violence, and all the other acts of insolent authority, like an inexorable master; but He is rather a King invested with a human and lawful authority, and as such He governs the whole world in accordance with justice. And there is no title more appropriate to a King than the name of *father*: for what, in human relationships, parents are to their children, that also a King is to his country and God towards the world, having adapted these two most beautiful things by the immutable laws of Nature—

\* The Talmud (Aboda Zara, 3a) has a similar expression. God does not act like a tyrant towards His creatures.

namely, (1) the authority of the leader, with (2) the anxious care of a relative. Parents are not wholly indifferent to even *prodigal* sons, but, having compassion on their unfortunate dispositions, they are careful and anxious for their welfare, looking upon it as the act of relentless enemies to increase their misfortunes, but as the part of friends and relatives to lighten their disasters. Moreover, in the excess of their liberality, they even *give more* to such children than to those who have always been well behaved, knowing well that to the latter their own moderation is at all times an abundant resource and means of riches, but that the *prodigal sons* have no other hope except in their parents, and that if they are disappointed in that, they will be destitute of even the bare necessities of life.

So in the same manner God, who is the Father of all rational beings, takes care of all endowed with reason, and exercises a providential power for the protection even of those who are living in a *sinful manner*, giving them at the same time opportunity of correcting their errors. Nevertheless, He does not violate the dictates of His own

merciful nature, of which virtue and philanthropy are the regular attendants, being willing to have their dwelling in the God-created world. 'This story now do thou, O my soul, take to thyself, and store up within thyself as a sacred treasure.'

This version is again found in Eusebius ('Præp. Evang.," viii., c. 14). (See Philo, Tauchnitz edition, vol. vi., p. 210, and vol. viii., pp. 60 and 61 ; see also Bohn's Philo, vol. iv., p. 223.) In another fragment of Philo (Tauchnitz edition, pp. 269, 270) we read : "Where there are two sons, one good and one wicked, the father says he will bless (εὐλογεῖν\*) the latter, not because he prefers him to his brother who is better, but because he knows that the good son can, by his own merit, follow the right path ; whereas the wicked son has no hope of salvation without the prayer of the father, and if this be withheld, then his fate would be sealed." Thus far Philo. Now, in these two pre-Christian passages we have the source of Luke's famous parable. We have already

\* This verb, in sense of blessing someone, is only found in Luke xxiv. 50 and Acts iii. 26—another instance, perhaps, of Luke's indebtedness to Philo.

shown that words peculiar to Luke, and not found elsewhere in the Gospels, *are* to be found in Philo. Philo lays stress on the universal love of God, who showers his benefits upon *all* men, even on the unworthy. God's love cannot be less than that of a human father who does not cast off his erring child. This is the lesson that Philo teaches in both passages. But he is merely re-echoing the old prophetic message: "Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for as often as I speak *against* him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore my bowels are troubled for him. I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord" (Jer. xxxi. 20). (See also Isa. xii. 1-6, xlix. 14-16, and Ezek. xviii. 23.)

We have said that Luke was written about 100 c.e.: our reason for this is the fact that he used Josephus, whose work was issued about 97 c.e. (The "Encyclopædia Biblica," col. 1893, assigns the year 100 c.e. as the superior, and somewhere about 110 c.e. as the inferior, limit of the date of Luke's Gospel.)\* Among

\* This agrees with the view of Pfleiderer, "Urchristentum," vol. i., p. 547.

the Jewish writings belonging to the same period as Luke's Gospel scholars have included the Apocryphal book known as Esdras II. The splendid edition of Gunkel ("Das 4 Buch Esra"), in Kautzsch's "Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments," is in German. A good English edition is to be had in the Temple Bible, published by Dent and Co. The book is well worth reading. Its chief problem is sin. Above all, Esdras shows a wonderful compassion for sinners that is not excelled by Luke's Gospel. If one speaks of finding a new note in the history of religion in Jesus's interest in sinners as recorded by Luke, it would be more correct to say this new note was another form of the old prophetic note that God desires the sinner to live and to return to his Heavenly Father. This note was never forgotten by the teachers of Israel. Philo in Egypt, and the Hebrew writer of Esdras II. (Gunkel fixes the date of its composition between 81 c.E. and 96 c.E., certainly earlier than Luke) were followed by Luke in teaching men to feel pity for the lost. We ask, Do the Gospels teach a higher morality than that taught by Philo and Esdras II.?

•

Let us illustrate the attitude of the writer of Esdras II. by a few quotations :

“We pass away out of the world as grasshoppers, and our life is astonishment and fear, and we are not worthy to obtain mercy. Yet what will He do for His name’s sake?” (iv. 24, 25).

Esdras entreats mercy for God’s creatures. The Divine reply is :

“For thou comest far short that thou shouldst be able to love My creature more than I” (viii. 47).

“For it was not God’s will that we should come to nought” (viii. 60).

“But because of us sinners, Thou shalt be called merciful. For if Thou hast a desire to have mercy upon us, Thou shalt be called merciful, to us, namely, that have no works of righteousness. . . . For in this, O Lord, Thy righteousness and Thy goodness shall be declared, if Thou wilt be merciful unto them which have not the confidence of good works” (viii. 31, 32, 36).

The seventh chapter is full of the deepest compassion for the destiny of the sinners. Esdras cannot bear to think that human beings should suffer eternal torments hereafter. It pains him to think that “many have been created, but few will be saved” (viii. 3). This is a good parallel to Jesus’s doom, “Many be called, but few chosen” (Matt. xxii. 14). The Gospel does *not* plead with God for the

outcasts. Esdras again and again entreats for them, even as Abraham prayed for mercy to be shown to the men of Sodom. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. xviii. 25). Another exquisite passage in Esdras is vii. 132-139; it proves that God ever pardoneth—"For if He did not do so of His goodness, that they which have committed iniquities might be eased of them, the ten-thousandth part of men should not remain living." The love of God is the assurance that He will help and save the souls of the sinners.

Long ago Schöttgen drew attention to a Midrashic parallel to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Midrash (Ex. rab., § 46), in explaining the text Isa. lxiv. 8, says: "A parable about the son of an eminent physician who, meeting an impostor, greets him by saying, 'My lord, my master, my father!' When the physician heard of this, he was vexed with his son, and said: 'Let him not see me again, because he called this impostor his father.' After some days had elapsed the son became very ill, and begged that his father might be asked to see him.\* When the father was informed of this

\* See also Siphre Vaetchanan, § 32, for idea of reconciliation through affliction.



request, his heart was touched (*cf.* Luke xv. 17), and he went to his son, who cried out: ‘O my father, look again on me!’ Then the father said: ‘Now verily am I thy father. In former days thou didst call the impostor thy father, but now, in thy distress, thou callest on me, saying, “O my father.”’” Even so God said to Israel: “Now ye call me Father, but in former days ye worshipped idols, saying to them, My father.” Thus it is written in Jer. ii. 27 of the house of Israel: “Who say to a stock, Thou art my father.” Later on, in the hour of distress, they cry: “But now, O Lord, thou art our Father” (Isa. lxiv. 8). The parallel seems to hold good with reference to the son’s attitude to his father, as well as *vice versa*. The reconciliation in both parables is due to the distress of the son. In Luke it is hunger, in the Midrash it is illness, that is the driving force. The Midrash parable is anonymous, and it is impossible to fix its date or origin.\* In the following Rabbinic parable we have as its author Rabbi Meir, a

\* Schechter, in “Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology,” p. 327, gives several illustrations of God’s grace in becoming reconciled with sinners.

possible contemporary of Luke. Rabbi Meir (*circa* 130 c.E.) preached a parable on the text, “And thou shalt return to the Lord thy God” (Deut. iv. 30). How is this to be compared? With a son of a King who leads an immoral life. Then the King sends a tutor to his son with the message: “Repent and reform, O my son!” Thereupon the son sends back the tutor to say to the King: “How is it possible for me to repent and reform, for I am ashamed of myself in thy presence?” Then once again the father sends the tutor with a message: “O my son, it is right for a son who has felt ashamed of his misdeeds to return home to his father. If thou wilt return home, is it not to thy father that thou comest?” In likewise God sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned. God said to the prophet: “Go and tell My sons to repent,” as it is written, “Go and proclaim these words, saying, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; I will not look in anger upon you, for I am merciful, saith the Lord. I will not keep anger for ever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that . . . thou hast scattered thy ways to the strangers” (Jer. iii. 12, 13). Israel’s reply was: “How is

it possible for us to return to God ?”—as it is written, “ Let us lie down in our shame, and let our confusion cover us, for we have sinned” (Jer. iii. 25). Then again God sent Jeremiah to His children, saying : “ O my sons, if ye return, will it not be to your Father ?” So it is written, “ I am a Father to Israel” (Jer. xxxi. 9). In this parable a deep religious note is struck. Neither in the previous Midrashic parable nor in Luke do we find the genuine contrition that makes one thoroughly ashamed of one’s sinful self, which is so beautifully and touchingly expressed in R. Meir’s parable (Deut., rab., § 2). (A variant of this parable is also given in the ‘*Pesikta*,’ p. 165*a*.) Our last quotation, dealing with the lesson taught in the parable of the Prodigal Son, will be a parable of unknown date found in the “*Mechilta*,” which dates back to the second century C.E. It illustrates God’s forgiveness, which belongs to all His children. Rabbi Absalom the Elder said in a parable : “ Say unto what is this matter likened ? Unto a man who was angry with his son, and drove him out of his house. Thereupon a friend of the father went to him to intercede on behalf

of the exiled son. The father said : ‘ Dost thou ask for any other favour besides the desire that I should forgive my son ? Know, indeed, that long, long ago have I forgiven him.’ So spake God to Moses : ‘ Why criest thou unto Me ?’ (Exod. xiv. 15). Long ago have I become reconciled with My children ’ ” (“Mechilta,” p. 35*b*, ed. Weiss).

The following parable, quoted anonymously in Midrash Jalkut, illustrates the lesson of repentance—a parable about a Prince who was living an evil life. His friends said to him : “ Thy father will in days to come punish thee ; he will imprison thee—nay, he will deliver thee into the hands of his servants, who will seek to starve thee. At last thou wilt come to thy senses and repent, asking thy father for his forgiveness. He will surely receive thee and forgive thee, and all thy misdeeds will be forgotten.” In this wise Hosea warned Israel, for he knew that in the days to come God would smite His people, as it is written, “ I will pour out My wrath upon them like water ” (Hos. v. 10). God also threatened to deliver them into the hands of the Princes of this world (Hos. vii. 16), and to withhold

the corn in its due season (Hos. ii. 9). Hosea urged his people to reverse the usual process, and, instead of suffering and learning the lesson of adversity that causes repentance, he cried to them, "Repent, O Israel" (Hos. xiv. 1), (Jalkut on Hosea xiv., § 531.)

If the parable of the Prodigal Son is the "pearl and crown" of the N.T. Scriptures, then the quoted parables of the Midrash, as well as of Philo, have an abiding message, not only for Jews, but for all men. Scant justice has been done to Philo by his co-religionists. He was not a Christian, as early legends assert, but a confirmed and devout Jew. His influence has been more widely felt in Christianity than in Judaism. Moreover, it has been left chiefly to Christian scholars, such as Siegfried, Bossuet, Bertholet, and Windisch, to deal with some of the most important aspects of Philo's theology. The last-mentioned writer goes so far as to say that Philo stands in "the courtyard of the Christian sanctuary" ("Die Frömmigkeit Philo's," p. 130). It is surely time to claim him as one of Israel's best teachers and missionaries. Through Philo and LXX Christianity learnt to know the Bible and religion of Israel.

The reader will probably ask, What is the aim of the writer in discussing the parable of the Prodigal Son? The answer to this question is threefold:

1. To show that Jews have no need to go to the New Testament in order to learn the supreme lesson that our Father in heaven is a gracious God. This is the message of the Old Testament.

2. To show that the parable was not unknown in Jewish literature long before the Gospels were written.

3. To emphasize the abiding mission of Israel, chosen by God to reveal the Divine to humanity, and to bring all men nearer and nearer to our Heavenly Father, "that Thy way may be known upon the earth, Thy salvation among all nations" (Ps. lxvii. 2).



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